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## No Harm Evident As Waste Dumping Continues In Gulf

By STEVEN ISBITTS [sisbitts@tampatrib.com](mailto:sisbitts@tampatrib.com)

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**CLEARWATER** - On Thursday, a state official said there is no evidence that treated phosphate wastewater dispersed into the Gulf of Mexico has caused fish kills or elevated red tide levels recently found off Florida's west coast.

"All of our monitoring data, water testing and satellite interpretation does not provide any implications that there is potential for ecological harm from the wastewater in the Gulf," said Charles Kovach, a biologist from the Department of Environmental Protection.

Kovach is overseeing the state's monitoring of the wastewater, which comes from the defunct Piney Point phosphate plant in Palmetto.

The DEP is executing a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency permit to remove highly toxic untreated wastewater from storage ponds at Piney Point, treat it and dump it into the Gulf.

During the past year, above- average rainfall at Piney Point has put the ponds in danger of overflowing into Bishop's Harbor and subsequently contaminating Tampa Bay estuaries.

In July, the DEP began pumping treated wastewater into a barge that has been traveling to the Gulf to spray the water in an area 120 to 140 miles offshore.

### 200 Million Gallons In Pipeline

The barge has made five trips and dispersed about 22 million gallons of treated wastewater, DEP spokeswoman Deena Wells said.

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Dozens of additional barge trips are planned before the EPA permit expires Nov. 30. The DEP hopes to disperse 200 million gallons into the Gulf, Wells said.

For months, fishermen and environmentalists have been concerned that high nitrogen and ammonia levels in the wastewater could cause red tide, an algae that can kill fish and cause respiratory ailments in humans.

### Phosphate Didn't Turn The Tide

Since the dumping began, the Florida Marine Research Institute in St. Petersburg has recorded low to medium red tide levels from Collier County to Dunedin.

The red tide likely has led to dead fish washing up on Pinellas County and Sarasota County beaches during past few weeks, said Beverly Roberts, an algal bloom expert with the Florida Marine Research Institute.

The entire 4 1/2-mile shoreline of St. Pete Beach was littered with dead fish for most of Wednesday, leading to the first major beach cleanup of the year, said Scott Graubard, the city's public works director.

Graubard said crews cleaned throughout the day, but there were no beach closings. He said he expects the cleanup to continue today.

Three miles north at Madeira Beach, few dead fish were seen Wednesday, Madeira Beach City Manager Jim Madden said.

Two weeks ago, Madeira Beach was affected by a fish kill that marine biologists also attributed to red tide.

But the red tide bloom has been present since before the wastewater dumping, Roberts said.

Wednesday, the DEP released the first interpretation of satellite tracking of the wastewater.

The report comes from the University of South Florida's College of Marine Science, which is being paid \$93,000 by the DEP to study satellite images daily until the permit expires.

USF scientists Chuanmin Hu and Gabe Vargo agreed with Kovach's statements about the treated wastewater's effects on the Gulf.

Hu said his lab will issue a weekly interpretation of satellite data, which can be accessed in the Piney Point section of the DEP's official Web site, [www.floridadep.org](http://www.floridadep.org).

Reporter Steven Isbitts can be reached at (727) 799-7413.

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